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Tutoring Older Adults In Literacy Programs

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LEEP Literacy Education for the Elderly Project

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The National Council on the Aging, Inc.
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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE AGING, INC.

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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to sensitize volunteer literacy tutors to the special needs and interests of illiterate older learners. It also gives useful tips for creating successful and self-rewarding learning experiences. The first section on the world of older adults with literacy problems describes some of the characteristics of this group. In the next section, reasons for participation and nonparticipation in a literacy program are discussed. Success tips for tutors are provided. These include gaining the students' trust, making learning goal-oriented, adapting one's teaching style, keeping motivation high, meeting students' needs, evaluating personal goals regularly, relying on peer supports, selecting appropriate teaching materials, using learning contracts, and being alert to learning problems. A chart summarizes techniques that can make tutoring a success; learning needs of older adults are correlated with ways in which tutors can help meet these needs. The final section addresses developing self-sufficiency. Topics include building confidence, broadening horizons, and expanding skills. (YLB)

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Tutoring Older Adults In Literacy Programs

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PREFACE

Illiteracy is a widespread social problem in America today. It is particularly serious among today's elderly population that comprises 38 percent of the total U.S. illiterate adult population (U.S. Department of Education, 1985). Many older persons cannot read or write well enough to fill out a form, write a simple letter or read a notice that may be critical to their survival. Many cannot even sign their own names. They live in an isolated world, dependent on others and highly vulnerable. Unable to communicate, understand essential information or make informed choices, they are functionally illiterate.

Though they represent such a large proportion of the U.S. illiterate adult population, few elderly people participate in adult literacy

programs offered in the community. The programs are usually offered in places they seldom frequent (schools, learning centers, etc.) and in neighborhoods where elderly people fear to venture alone, especially at night. Many literacy programs focus on the young adult with employment potential and are, for the most part, irrelevant to older adults with special needs and interests.

The Literacy Education for the Elderly Project (LEEP), a two-year project sponsored by The National Council on the Aging, Inc., under a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, was launched to focus on the needs of illiterate elderly citizens. LEEP enabled NCOA to target literacy education programs to older adults in 27 sites nationwide and develop a strategy to:

- link the aging services network (i.e., senior centers, offices on aging, senior housing projects) with the volunteer adult literacy network (i.e. Literacy Volunteers of America affiliates, Laubach Literacy Action councils, libraries, public schools and church groups) at the local level.

- recruit and train older adults as volunteer literacy tutors and peer supports for other older adults who lack basic literacy skills;

- deliver literacy education to older adults at sites where they participate in large numbers.

The national demonstration also allowed for the development and testing of methods, materials and techniques useful in tutoring older adults and managing volunteer literacy programs involving older adults, including:

ORGANIZING A LITERACY PROGRAM FOR OLDER ADULTS: A comprehensive guide for stimulating and assisting the growth of a literacy education program for older adults as students and tutors. An overview of literacy education for older adults, discussion of special management issues, program descriptions, results of the 27 demonstration sites nationwide, summary recommendations for program design and a resource list are included.

TUTORING OLDER ADULTS IN LITERACY PROGRAMS: A booklet designed to sensitize volunteer literacy tutors to the special needs and interests of illiterate older learners and give useful tips for creating successful and self-rewarding learning experiences.

UPDATE ON HEALTHY AGING: READING MATERIAL ON HEALTH TOPICS FOR THE NEW READER AND TUTOR: Low-vocabulary, high interest reading materials on health issues to enhance the learning of the new older reader.

The Literacy Education for the Elderly Project represents a starting yet significant effort to meet the needs of illiterate elderly persons by promoting the use of older volunteers as tutors and peer supports, creating new linkages between the aging services and adult literacy networks and developing materials based on demonstration experience that allow for program replication nationwide. LEEP has raised awareness of the illiterate elderlys' special needs and built a potential pool of older volunteers. We hope this initial effort will continue to expand literacy education for and by older adults.

THE WORLD OF OLDER ADULTS WITH LITERACY PROBLEMS

Older adults with low reading and writing skills, like any other group, differ from one another in backgrounds, personalities and life-styles. The one thing they do have in common is their problem with reading and writing. The following sections describe some of the characteristics of this group.

Educational Backgrounds

Illiterate older adults generally had little formal education in their early years. Some who came from foreign countries, or whose parents spoke another language may have had language problems that made school and reading difficult. Economic circumstances forced others to leave school early and help support their families. Literacy

expectations for girls were low because some families considered education more important for boys. In rural areas, children frequently missed school during harvest or planting seasons, or even left school after a few years to help on the family farm.

Even when in school, not all students received quality instruction. Today's teachers are better trained and have more educational methods and techniques available. Poor teaching may have also caused negative attitudes toward school and it wasn't until relatively recently that all states had compulsory education laws requiring children to attend school until age 16.

Physical problems can also limit learning and reading. An undiagnosed and untreated dyslexia, an impaired ability to read, plus other factors may affect the older adult's reading and writing ability.

Lifelong Illiteracy

Out of necessity, older adults with literacy problems show sophisticated survival skills and ways to compensate. For example, even if they avoid printed materials, they get information and

keep current through watching television, listening to the radio and conversing with others.

People with literacy problems tend to rely on those around them for help in filling out forms and applications, paying bills or writing letters. In later years, however, their support network of parents, siblings or spouses may have died or their children and friends may have moved away. They must shore up this network or establish informal support systems for each situation that arises.

Some older adults with literacy problems are embarassed by their lack of reading or writing skills and fear that others may discover their problems. Some even hide their deficiencies from family and close friends. Yet others will freely admit their difficulties and ask for help when they need it.

Impact of Illiteracy on Older Adults

Even after 50, 60 or 70 years of coping, illiteracy remains a problem that can't go away by itself.

Health and illiteracy influence each other. Hearing loss can reduce the older person's ability to learn by watching television or hearing others talk. The inability to read the information that accompanies prescription medicine may result in its misuse. Other consequences of illiteracy may include inadequate nutritional information or limited adequate knowledge of the early warning signs of serious illnesses.

Literacy problems can also affect older adults in their ability to get around. Unable to pass a driver's test, they have to depend on rides from others. If these support people move away or die, those who depend on them are out of luck. Mobility is affected in other ways. The older adult may have trouble reading bus or subway maps and schedules, or finding out about proposed route changes and transportation programs that serve elderly persons.

Literacy problems can limit an older person's access to benefits or entitlement programs. Information on Social Security, Medicare and Supplemental Security Income is usually contained in printed materials, and those who want the benefits

must usually fill out a form. These forms and program materials are often written at a high school reading level in complex and confusing terms. An older adult with literacy problems may also have trouble using a telephone directory to learn if and where needed services exist.

Some people with literacy problems may feel increasingly alone as they age. They may lose those who helped them read or write through relocation or death. Without these people, older adults may not hear about services for elderly people or community cultural and recreation programs that are publicized in newspapers.

Finally, illiteracy is bound to affect self-image. Some older adults feel inadequate or inferior, particularly if people judge them by their literacy skills. Other older adults have rewarding personal relationships that help make up for this lack.

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WHY PARTICIPATE IN A LITERACY PROGRAM?

What factors influence the decision to participate in a program? They may depend on what older adults know about the program, how they feel about it and how they feel about themselves.

Why People Do Not Participate

Personal fears may keep some older adults away. Fears of failure, of embarassment, of being too old to learn are other reasons. Some people feel that learning to read or write won't change their lives for the better. Be aware that such fears may exist, and be prepared to reassure your students.

Other personal problems that prevent older adults from enrolling in a literacy program may include poor health, hearing or vision losses or family responsibilities.

The literacy program itself and the environment in which it is offered can set up barriers. Literacy programs may be offered at locations hard to reach by public transportation, classes may be scheduled at night, or buildings may not be physically accessible to older adults who have trouble with stairs or child-sized school furniture.

Finally, an obvious but often overlooked barrier to participation is that the potential student is unaware of the literacy program and what it can offer.

Reason for Participating

On the other hand, personal and external events can motivate older adults to enroll in literacy programs. Some older adults want to achieve a few of their lifelong goals while they still have the time and energy to do so. They want to complete things -- to do what's left undone. Learning to read or write may be one of these goals.

Other older adults with literacy problems may be motivated by the need to know how to read or feelings of inadequacy that have reached a critical

point. Changes in their lives may result from losing family or friends or gaining an interest in programs for which they are now eligible. It's hard to keep up with changes around you when you can't read about or understand them.

Sometimes the motivation comes from someone else. Older literacy tutors have shown great success by making personal contact or by letting potential students know they are not alone with their problem and that there is now a program to meet their learning needs. Program representatives should also point out the non-threatening atmosphere, the peer involvement, the small group or individual format, other services available at the site such as transportation or meals and the satisfaction of reaching new goals.

SUCCESS TIPS FOR TUTORS

Whether or not you've ever taught anyone before, you can make tutoring a success for both yourself and your students.

Gain The Students Trust

From the start, establish trust with your students. Take time to get to know each other, and try to reduce any anxiety on either side. As a tutor, be sure to recognize and emphasize your students abilities, not just their problems. Let them know that their ideas, contributions and life experiences are just as important as the ability to read and write.

Learning Should Be Goal Oriented

Once lessons begin, make sure that your approach and methods suit your older adults. For example, all of us learn better when the information we receive has immediate relevance to our own lives. So, learning should be goal-oriented, specific to the interests and goals of the students. Teaching may be an opportunity to share experiences and learn from each other. Even the best tutors don't know everything. Older students, having lived long lives, can teach us much about creativity, coping and survival. Their contributions are valuable and should be treated as such. The insights you gain from listening to older students can help you choose materials and learning exercises to match their interests.

Adapt Your Teaching Style

Personalize your teaching for each student. Keep the individual in mind. You will teach better when you take time to discover how each person learns best. Everyone has a learning style. Some people like to listen to someone present information; others like to go off on their own to search for

answers to their questions. Talk to your students about the kind of learning experiences they enjoy most and adapt your teaching methods to that learning style.

Keep Motivation High

An important part of learning is developing and retaining the motivation that learning to read or write takes. It's hard work. Recognize and acknowledge the frustration that some people feel when they get bogged down by a tough problem. Help the older student work through the problem or find other ways of dealing with it. By all means, let your students know that they're still doing well and that they can overcome the problem. Encouragement and reinforcement from family and friends also help.

Meet Your Student's Needs

Older adults learn best when the teacher's style is tailored to the students' needs. Though older adults learn as well as younger ones, many learn better when information is given more slowly and with more time to absorb it. Take into account any hearing, sight or memory problems your students may have. Keep tutoring periods brief with frequent

breaks. Adapt your style to any language difficulties. If your students speak with a strong accent or in an unfamiliar regional dialect, listen extra carefully and ask them to speak slowly.

Evaluate Personal Goals Regularly

Any teacher-student relationship involves assessing student progress formally or informally. With older adults, assess progress in relation to their goals, not yours. In this type of program, achieving personal goals is more important than achieving standard reading levels.

Rely on Peer Supports

Learning in a literacy program can be enhanced by involving those who have volunteered to give peer support. Their work with older students can help build confidence, reinforce the learning that has taken place and help improve reading and writing skills. Peer support is particularly important with small group tutoring because it increases the amount of individual attention the student receives.

Select Appropriate Teaching Materials

First, select tutoring materials on the basis of what your students want to learn and what is appropriate. Match written materials to their reading levels. As they progress, you can change the difficulty of the materials to help their skills grow.

Second, the materials should be relevant to learning needs and goals and should correspond to the reasons a student wants to learn to read. For example, someone who wants to read the Bible may learn well by starting with Bible stories. Practical articles on consumer fraud, health, legal concerns, energy conservation or Medicare can make learning easier by making it applicable to the older person's daily concerns.

Third, reading materials should clearly reflect the older students' progress and accomplishments. In other words, after completing an article, they should know that they have accomplished something. Tutors can then reinforce this achievement by providing recognition or rewards.

Fourth, learning materials should be easy for the older person to see as well as read. Try to find articles, stories and books with large size type, space between lines, ink that contrasts sharply with the paper and pages that are glare-free.

Finally, put yourself into the teaching materials. Bring in articles or poems that you've saved or books that you particularly like. If the reading level is appropriate, you can share these with your students and compare their reactions with your own. Through such discussions, tutors and students learn from each other.

Try Using Learning Contracts

Learning contracts are short written statements that specify what the student wants to accomplish and when. If learning contracts are written to cover small, specific goals, such as "learning to read a specific recipe" instead of "learning to read poetry", it's easier for the student to see progress and for you to reinforce that learning at each step. Keep in mind, however, that not completing a learning contract isn't the same as failing; the contract may not have been the best for that student.

Be Alert To Learning Problems

As you tutor, you will remind yourself of all the reasons why students want to improve their reading skills. But eagerness and motivation won't be enough if physical or psychological factors block learning ability.

Be alert to physical changes and health problems that occur with aging. The older person who cannot read printed material because of failing eyesight, cannot hear instructions because of hearing loss or cannot write because of arthritis will find learning frustrating and difficult. Before you start tutoring, check out any obvious problems the student may have. Then talk to a senior center director, a social worker or a local office on aging to see what health screening services are available, particularly for sight and hearing. Try to get the student the necessary medical attention.

Fatigue can also interfere with learning. Learning to read requires complete concentration. Be attuned to whether your students have the energy to complete a session and their assigned tasks.

Many older adults have invisible, undiagnosed neurological problems. Such students may forget what they have learned. Or they may be unable to link words they see with words they speak. Or they may write words backwards. The symptoms and diagnoses of learning difficulties are technical and complex. If you think that a student has such a problem, try working with him or her for a period of time. If progress is discouragingly slow, despite the best efforts, tutoring may have to be discontinued. In such circumstances, acknowledge that no one is at fault and there are others who can benefit from your expertise. Above all, seek help if you suspect a physical or mental problem is creating learning difficulties for your student.

Useful Techniques*

The following chart summarizes some techniques that can help make tutoring a success for both you and your students.

LEARNING NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS	HOW TUTORS CAN HELP MEET THESE NEEDS
Need for physical comfort and adaptation to sensory problems	Comfortable rooms (heating, ventilation, air conditioning). Good lighting. Let students sit near the source of sound. Materials with large print type.
Relevant material	Base materials on learner needs and interests. Link textbook information to learner's experience.
Flexible learning pace	Allow students time they need. Keep sessions short, amounts of information small. Avoid sudden surprises or changes.

Involvement in the learning process	Encourage students to set learning goals and discover resources for learning. Promote student's responsibility for learning. Utilize discovery techniques.
Organized, useful material	Set learning goals. Write out learning plans. Encourage practicing techniques. Use materials and information that have practical meaning to learners.
Evaluate efforts	Recognize achievements. Minimize chance of failure. Provide regular feedback.

*Adapted from: Roger Hiemstra, Preparing Human Service Practitioners to Teach Older Adults. ERIC Clearinghouse, National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio, 1980.

DEVELOPING SELF-SUFFICIENCY

As your students learn reading and writing skills, they will eventually be able to continue on their own. Reaching this goal, bringing your students to the point where they no longer need your help, is a tribute to your tutoring.

Building Confidence

As valuable as your tutoring work is with older learners, you can perform an even greater service by helping them gain the confidence they need to keep learning and growing on their own. You can encourage their progress, emphasize each success and reinforce the strengths and skills they already possess. Their increased sense of self-worth and confidence will help them feel more comfortable about taking risks and stretching their skills.

Broadening Horizons

Your "classroom" should provide a supportive and secure environment, but it is not the "real world." You can build your students' self-confidence by encouraging them to learn about the world around them. Street signs, magazine covers on newsstands or advertisements on buses or trains offer opportunities to practice reading skills.

Students who are comfortable doing so should encourage their families and friends to read with them at home and to help strengthen reading skills in a less-structured atmosphere. Informal activities like games, baking a cake and putting something together can also make learning more fun.

Expanding Skills

Once you have worked with your students for a while, you may find that some are ready to move on to other learning opportunities. Your knowledge of other adult education programs in your community will help them find the best one for their needs.

Another possibility is for your "graduates" to become peer supports for other older students. They may then share their experience and skills

while continuing their own learning activities. They can also become literacy tutors, another way to teach and learn at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Tutoring older adults in reading and writing can be rewarding for both you and your students. It's an opportunity to make a major change in someone's life by sharing your time and talents. All it takes is what you already know, the interest and patience to teach someone else and the techniques suggested in this booklet. Literacy tutoring is a program in which your commitment and skills can open doors and let in opportunities. You can make that difference.

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